

A Strategic Call for All-Female Production Spaces

This paper examines The Mickee Faust Academy for the *REALLY* Dramatic Arts' Queer as Faust's 2016 staged reading of *Shero: Femme Fatale*, an original lesbian super-Shero comedy that investigates the feminist struggle through the eyes of Shero/Heart, male Detective by day and female avenger by night. It aims to propose a strategy for developing collaborative all-female performance spaces by sharing an account of the production's successes and failures; a feat that the staged reading of *Shero: Femme Fatale* at the Mickee Faust Schnittman Hall was able to achieve - almost.

The characters of Shero/Heart, SJ, Ashley and Villinulva have danced down the soul train line of my mind for years. Perhaps that is why I am so overprotective about the parameters placed on the show, *Shero: Femme Fatale*, which gives them life. These characters are my friends. I owe them the same level of loyalty they have shown me in times of crisis. In fact, television and movies have always served as a point of sanctuary; a place for possibility. For that reason, I was shocked to discover that as I prepared to write surrounded with decades of stories held in my 1990's romantic comedy heavy collection of VHS and DVD movies and television series there was minimal inspiration on those shelves. One would expect, considering how often a story is retold and resold, that by 2014 I would have a multitude of stories with female Sheros to choose from. That was not the case. On the rare occasion I did encounter a female Shero, like Gina Davis in *Cut Throat Island* or Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*, the plot inevitably revolved around men. None came close to passing the Bechdel-Wallace test, created by writer Alison Bechdel and friend Liz Wallace in the 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This test proposes a method for avoiding movies with a sexist rhetoric that promote the dominance of men over women in entertainment. The movie must have a) at least two women in it who b) talk to

each other about c) something besides a man. Surprisingly finding a script that fulfills all three of these requirements is rather tricky. Thus, with no female lead to stimulate my creative process, I reached for the next best thing, a series sure to ignite my melodramatic nature and get the carefully worded overly-articulated dialogue flowing. As *Dawson's Creek* played, I began to write. I sat in solitude and allowed the voices to present themselves to me. One by one each appeared, remanences of my past lovers and friends reflected in their essences. The process was intimate, personal, individual, almost self-serving. Still, amidst this private intimacy, I knew a larger communal need was presenting itself. I was not only creating a strong female lead that I would be challenged to play and interested to explore, but I had created an all-female cast. The characters are meant to represent stereotypes of class, race, and gender. The audience subsequently finds itself constantly rethinking perspective by casting an all-female cast to perform those characters. Each character presented could only be conveyed by those who have experienced societal oppression directly. In the case of *Shero* the characters carried with them centuries of oppression placed upon cis, trans and gender fluid women.

In 2015 Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori won two Tony Awards for *Fun Home*; bringing lesbian theatre to the commercial masses. Although such an accomplishment enhances the role of women in musical theatre, the fact that *Fun Home* was the first all-female writing team publicly praised and decorated by Tony critics illuminates the larger need for all-female collaborative creative teams and spaces. When developing new plays, it is imperative that we look beyond onstage gender representation and focus our eye on the representation of gender in the production/writing teams. The goal is not only to get into the room but to, as Cherrie Moraga signifies, recognize what is absent in that room and respond to it. The room I sit in as a female playwright is scarce. It holds ancient stories created by men and praised by the patriarchy and the

room's structure supports a gender hierarchy aimed to widen a gap and solidify heteronormative expectations. Do any other rooms exist? Must an entire new room be created or is the awareness of its shortcomings enough to produce change in the system that houses the room? Or can we simply populate the room with allies, women? I believe it is only through forming all-female development teams can we create performance spaces that empower an inclusive intersectionality of all identifications of women and promote creative performances that are for, by and about women. Much to my creative dismay, all-female spaces are not easy to procure or cultivate.

The Mickee Faust Academy for the *REALLY* Dramatic Arts, a theatre for the weird, tucked away in the Warehouses of Rail-Road Square Art Park in Tallahassee, FL nestled between a Vintage store and a Buddhist temple, has welcomed me into their fold. Considering its thirty-year run as a non-profit organization, my status as Faustkateer is fairly new, but still my work is valued and supported. This collective continues to expand my practices and methods. Faust provides a theatrical experience where I can both question my truths and throw tampons into the audience. Inside, almost every inch of the theatre displays art pieces fashioned by the house manager. Its queerness rejoices in the thoughtful adornment of the gay flags that wave high or the cleverly displayed bathroom poop humor. For thirty years the Mickee Faust Club has written and produced queer, gay and lesbian theatre for Tallahassee and audiences world-wide. Still, the organization remains under addressed in theatrical scholarship. Most are unaware of the true lesbian theatre lineage that Faust encounters through the artistic treasures found in Co-founders, Terry Galloway and Donna Nudd. Donna chuckles as I share with her my encounter with the writing of Peggy Shaw and Holly Hughes and other W.O.W. café members. "Go ask Terry about her time at PS122!" she bellows and then turns with power and grace vanishing into

her tiny queer office. Who knew a move to Tallahassee, FL would allow for such encounters? Within three months of my involvement with Faust, I found myself presenting *Shero: Femme Fatale* to one of the Faust producers. During that time, I inadvertently began to set boundaries that have shaped my current method of production; boundaries I have simplified for ease of sharing and recreating. I humbly present four steps to empower women through practice, collaboration, and consciousness:

Step 1: Define Woman and the spatial practices of gender

Step 2: Hire Women in leadership roles both on and off stage.

Step 3: Invoke Feminist values of education, collaboration, and consciousness-raising.

Step 4: Share with the popular masses, again and again.

Step 1: Define Woman and the spatial practices of gender

The first question I asked myself when moving forward with the concept of having an all-female collaborative creative environment was, “What is female?” followed directly by, “How dare I ask that?” Gender falls upon a spectrum delineated by societal impositions - of that I am aware. I also am aware that I, among many other individuals, for the moment, identify as a woman, and as a woman, I desire a space where I can feel safe to express my womanhood without a male gaze, intentional or not, blocking that radiance. The subjugation of cis, trans and gender fluid female artists does not begin on the stage, it begins years before that production ever loaded in. What would woman mean to this reading of *Shero*? The title of “woman” was not meant to be an exclusive one. On the contrary, the space created was inclusive both in gender identity, sexuality, and presentation. Although there was no gender fluid actor in the staged reading of *Shero*, it is something the production will inevitably encounter when mounted fully. Through collective

consciousness sessions the power of all-female spaces would be expressed and those who find themselves flowing between the two genders would be asked to bring their female selves within the production room. This is much easier said than done. Is it even possible for people to control their gender in that manner? Furthermore, how would gender binary individuals fall within the constraints of this definition? The negotiation of people present in the room will be a constant conversation and revisiting of the ultimate goals of creating all-female Collective performance spaces and creative teams. Theatre historian Alison Findlay argues performance space is both a “representation of space” and a “representational space.” When the definition of Gender tangos with that of space, we realize Women’s spaces are a representational space for women as well as a representation of woman.

Step 2: Hire Women in leadership roles both on and off stage.

Many an artist finds themselves stumbling over themselves. Ultimately a time comes when an artist must be able to identify their own self-deprecation and be willing to expand the self-constructed boundaries and constrictions they have placed on the work. *Shero* was my time. Mickee Faust Club produced a staged reading of *Shero: Femme Fatale* as part of a summer festival that housed the Faust Summer cabaret, *Queer as Faust*. Terry and Donna would be out of town during the run, so Jimmers, a cis-gendered male, would produce. Although I knew his talents would serve the project, my hesitation stemmed from a valid place: the unarguable discrepancy between men and women in Theatre. The 2015 *Women Count* by Binus and Steketee analyzed the employment of women in 13 professional roles in 455 Off- and Off-Off-Broadway productions. Women playwrights represented in the study Off-Broadway theatres range from a low of 28% in 2011-2012 to a high of 36% in 2012-2013. Directors ranged from 40% -22%, lighting designers range as low as 8% women, and women sound designers ranged from a high

of 22% to a low of 14%. The study showed that Costume Designers are overwhelmingly women, reflecting the heteronormative expectations of women's role in the workforce as matronly and domestic. Following similar societal structures, nationally, stage managers average 70% women.

(A nod-

to all the women:

who have kept me organized in my life.

My mother,

my wife.)

Although it is probable that these numbers reflect a study whose definition of woman falls under the normative binary understanding of gender and thus is non-inclusive of our transgender and gender fluid sisters, it's findings still remind me that a significant portion of the world does not care to hear what women have to say, let alone to view the theatre their souls can create. Theorists and artists alike have discussed some contributing factors to such inequitable representations in American Theatre today. In her article, *Discrimination and the Female Playwright*, that reads more like an expose of sexist practices in playwriting, Sheri Wilner presents possibilities for discrimination against women playwrights. First, she states that women producers and artistic directors are more likely to dismiss female scripts because of an ingrained "prophetic discrimination." Wilner defines this as an act where a person will draw on their own personal experiences of discrimination against and discriminate against someone of their own subjugated group. She argues that women will subconsciously choose scripts written by men because they assume their audiences will not be attracted or entertained by a play written by a woman. Secondly, women are not encouraged to write as a way to sustain themselves financially. Finally, Wilner admits that the numbers are inevitably greater for men to succeed as

playwrights; more male writers and more male plays produced. Therefore, we are responsible for carving out spaces in which women can write, create and produce theatre as well as play key leadership roles in the distribution of plays to the public.

Step 3: Invoke Feminist values of education, collaboration, and consciousness.

In 1971, Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, wanting to create a female art community, started the Feminist Art Program at The California Institute of the Arts. This program's focus was to provide a space where art work made by women would be seen in a context "other than the male system." Forty-six years later, the University I currently attend does not offer a stand-alone Bachelors in Women's Studies. The same systemic oppression that makes these possible reaches into the development spaces of new creative works. It limits the collective power obtained when women gather by placing them within male dominated structures. When first encountering Judy Chicago I was drawn to her pedagogical approach. The process is rooted in the consciousness-raising techniques used in the 60s and 70s to discuss topics equally and openly. Chicago's process created a space for community to grow out of individualized experiences. This feminist approach informed my methodology and is essential to the process.

As witnessed in our first rehearsal, *Shero* followed the paths toward the destruction of those parameters. I asked each cast member to draw the symbol of their own supershero along with their super power. The responses ranged, my own personal favorite was "Butch to Femme in 60 seconds." This exercise, however simple, situated itself within a feminist context. It provided a space for the art made to extend from individual experience and collective sharing. Exercises like these also led to an understanding of how ideas were to be shared during the five weeks we were to work together, freely, and uncensored. Although, Jill Dolan proclaims the use of

“consciousness-raising techniques to be, after years of theorizing, practicing and refining politics,” to be a simplistic and conservative practice, I find it’s connotations liberating. Dolan forgets that not all feminist today lived through a time where consciousness-raising occurred. Perhaps it is time we revisit some of these techniques.

Step 4: Share with the popular masses again and again

This step is short, but powerful. Popular mainstream entertainment does not adhere to the feminist structures previously discussed. Audiences are trained to expect weak women whose plots revolve around men. Once the women in the development staff have written the show, the women of the production staff, Directors, Technicians, Designers, have prepared the show, and the women in the cast have delivered the show, it is up to the audience to receive the show, but must they too be women? If the art is made by men and shared by men, does it not make the appreciation of art an elite male experience? Can an audience be retrained to respect the experiences of women through history as valid and worth commemorating through performance? The stride toward the development of all-female spaces may stretch into the audience, but it is not necessary. Necessity lies more so in the nurturing of feminist audience members. I say make the audience as varied as possible and provide them with an opportunity to see through another’s eyes. Internal awareness leads to external expression which can, if effective, lead to change. Make audiences aware of the lack of woman’s experiences on stage and perhaps their awareness of their own internalized sexism will allow for a more genuine expression enacted to create change.

The Mickee Faust Academy for the *REALLY* Dramatic Arts’ Queer as Faust’s 2016 staged reading of *Shero: Femme Fatale* was an experiment with space. Its conclusions provide us with a realistic approach to establishing all-female spaces when developing new theatrical

works. The process was difficult and under the initial parameters, not a complete success; However, in reflecting upon my experiences I find that all-woman spaces do not need to stand alone. Reality continues to show that women make less money than men; therefore, have less money to invest, making women owned production venues harder to come by. Perhaps more beneficial to the overall goal of making collaborative female performance spaces is the collaboration with queer venues to designate time, space, and funds to the delineation of all-female spaces with the goal of producing new works for, by and about Women. With this we can begin to build our own queer system that does not privilege gender but community reverence and individual identity.

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